

MUSICAL TRADITIONS

My \$99 Martin Guitar

By Stewart Hendrickson

We had just finished a great Thanksgiving dinner and retired to the living room for some serious jamming. In the middle of one of my songs there was a loud CRACK! Startled, I looked down on my vintage 1955 Martin D-18 guitar. All the strings were there and the top was still on. It took me a minute to realize that the front of the bridge had broken off and the broken piece of bridge and saddle were several feet in front of me on the floor.

After the initial shock, I got my “Little Martin” and, still a bit shaken, finished my song. Now, a bridge replacement on a guitar isn’t a big deal. I would see to that the next day. But meanwhile, let me tell you something about this guitar.

Back in early 1956, when I was a college freshman, I wanted a new guitar to replace a crummy archtop. I had a 3/4 size violin that I had used as a kid but no longer had any use for. I took it to the big classical music store in downtown Los Angeles (anyone remember the name?) and sold it. I must have gotten close to \$100, because I then went across the street to a guitar shop and bought a new Martin D-18 guitar for \$99. My friends had told me that was the best guitar to buy.

In college that guitar went on a hay ride, played backup for a fraternity brother’s serenade to his girl friend under her dorm window, played in small dorm-room jams, at least one talent show, and at various outings. It was a nice guitar but I never thought anything special about it.

Later I played that guitar at some house parties in Berkeley in the early 1960s, around camp fires in Texas, Oklahoma and Colorado in the late 1960s, and at house jams and Unitarian Sunday meetings in Minnesota in the 1970s.

Around 1980 I noticed a small crack in one of the braces and took the guitar to Hoffman Guitars, a Martin dealer and repair shop in Minneapolis. After I took the guitar out of its case, several workers came over and looked with awe at my guitar. It was then that I realized my guitar might be something special – *a vintage Martin*. They said if I was the original owner it was under a lifetime warranty and C. F. Martin would pay for the repair. Because I had no warranty papers I just wrote a letter to Martin and it was repaired at no cost.

Now back to my broken bridge. Prior to about 1960 Martin guitars had what is called a “slot-through” bridge. That is, the top of the bridge has a slot cut all the way across, into which the saddle is fitted (both ends of the saddle are exposed). That’s the easiest way to make the bridge, but not the best, because there is little wood holding the saddle in the bridge against any forward torque. These bridges were prone to breaking. Later, bridges of Martin guitars were made with a slot for the saddle that was not open at both ends. That is one way to date a vintage Martin.

So the day after Thanksgiving I called the C. F. Martin Company in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. It was amazing! A real person answered the phone after just a few rings. When I explained my situation she connected me directly with a service representative. He asked me if I had the original warranty. I replied “no, that was over fifty years ago.” After I gave him the serial number he told me there were several dozen owners of D-18 Martin guitars named Hendrickson. I then mentioned that I had the guitar repaired in Minneapolis in about 1980 under warranty after I had written a short letter to Martin explaining that I was the original owner. He said to hold for a minute, and when he came back on the phone he said “no problem, just have

the guitar repaired by a certified Martin repair person and we will pay for the repair.” Now how many large companies (or even small ones) will give you that kind of service?

The following week I talked to Cat Fox of Sound Guitar Repair in Fremont. She referred me to Dave Doucet, a Martin-certified luthier in Bellingham. It took a while to get my guitar to him, and he was well booked with other repairs, so it wasn't until the end of January when I got my guitar back. But when I did, it was like an old friend had come home.

Dave did a nice job with the new bridge. At first glance it looks like the original slot-through bridge. The bridge, supplied by Martin, had a slot routed into it. But when the saddle was placed into the slot the ends were beveled down so that it looked like the old slot-through bridge.

I had sort of gotten used to playing my “Little Martin,” but when I played my vintage Martin again I could really appreciate its mellow well-aged tone. No, it's not for sale! I will keep it and eventually pass it on to a well-deserving young player, hopefully one of my grandchildren.

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